

GUIDELINES FOR OBSERVATIONS

When to Use Observations

You might want to conduct observations in the following situations:

- To collect information about processes or situations
- To study interactions and behaviors in natural settings
- To describe a physical environment
- To record characteristics of individuals and groups, or measure fidelity

Steps in Conducting Observations

Step 1. Identify evaluation questions to be answered through observations

Step 2. Identify what you would like to observe

For example, you might observe:

- Interactions: Level of participation, interest, decision-making, general climate, levels of support, and cooperation
- Nonverbal behavior: Facial expressions, gestures, and posture
- Evidence of implementation: Participation in program or intervention, achievement of goals, and completion of activities
- Actions of program facilitators: Clarity of communication, group leadership skills, awareness of group climate, flexibility, and knowledge
- Physical surroundings: Rooms, amenities, and seating arrangements
- Program products: Plans, brochures, and manuals

Step 3. Choose an approach to collect the data /choose controlled or natural observations

You might use the following approaches to collect observation data:

- Recording checklists: Standardized forms, with pre-set questions and responses, for observing specific behaviors or attributes
- Observation guides: Forms that list behaviors or processes to observe, with space to record open-ended data
- Open field notes: Narrative records of what observers hear and see; a flexible way to document observations

The observation format depends on your evaluation needs as well as the target population.

- Controlled observations are conducted in structured and arranged settings. They are usually overt (observers make their presence known)
- Natural observations are conducted in unstructured and real-life settings. They can be overt or covert (observers do not make their presence known)
 - Participant observations are the most common type of natural observation. In this case, observers either overtly or covertly immerse themselves in the environment of those being observed
 - Participants may change their behavior in the presence of observers
 - Always consider ethical issues (e.g., deception, privacy) and consent procedures when conducting overt or covert observations

Step 4. Determine timing and select an observation site(s)

- Determine when and how frequently you will conduct observations
 - Taking action or making a decision after only a single observation can be misguided, so consider the number of observations needed
- Determine how long your observations will be

- Should be long enough to capture the beginning, middle, and end of what you are interested in observing
- Participants' behaviors may change during the timeframe you are observing
- Also consider whether the time of day, week, season, or year will influence your findings
- It is important to select enough observation sites so that the data are representative of the target population

Step 5. Develop a protocol

An observation protocol should include the following information from steps 1 through 4:

- The evaluation question(s)
- The items to observe
- The data collection approach (recording sheet or checklist, observation guide, or open field notes)
- The type of observation (controlled or natural, overt or covert)
- Directions related to the approximate timing of observations and the use of the data collection form
- Information about the observation site(s)

Step 6. Identify and train observers

- Potential observers include stakeholders, other professionals, program participants, graduate students, and interns. Consider whether you need one or more observers
- Train all observers on the observation protocol to ensure they understand the protocol and can apply it consistently across observations
- Include practice observations in the training so observers can use the protocol and compare notes

- If the observation protocol includes a rating scale, make sure observers clearly understand each level of the scale

Step 7. Conduct observations

- Consider audio- or video-recording observations, if possible
- If recording is not possible, taking good notes is important
- It may also be a good idea to have multiple observers present at an observation so they can discuss and reach consensus about any uncertainties that arise

Note. This handout was adapted from the following sources:

Guidelines for Observations, by the Institute of Education Sciences.
<https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/regions/central/pdf/CE5.3.2-Guidelines-for-Observations.pdf>.

Data Collection Methods for Program Evaluation: Observation, by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2018).
<https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/evaluation/pdf/brief16.pdf>.

